



TADBIR: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam

P-ISSN: 2338:6673; E-ISSN 2442:8280

Vol. 13. No. 03. Oktober, 2025, Hal: 666-678

POSITIVISM AS A NEW ERA IN PHILOSOPHY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ISLAMIC SOCIAL STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

The influence of positivism is evident in the attempt to integrate empirical methods and normative religious values, giving rise to a dialectic between scientific rationality and revelatory spirituality. This study uses a qualitative method with a library research approach, through an examination of classical and contemporary works on positivist philosophy, the sociology of religion, and Islamic social thought. Primary data sources include the philosophical texts of Comte, Durkheim, and Weber, while secondary data includes modern Islamic academic literature discussing the epistemology of social science, such as the works of Al-Attas, Arkoun, and Fazlur Rahman. The analysis was conducted descriptively and analytically, highlighting the relationship between positivism and the Islamic social science paradigm, particularly in terms of epistemology, methodology, and research ethics. The results of the study show that positivism has made a significant contribution to the rationalization of social studies in Islam, particularly in the fields of economics, politics, and education, by emphasizing the importance of observation and empirical data. However, the acceptance of positivism as a whole has the potential to neglect the transcendental dimension that is at the core of Islamic teachings. Therefore, an integrative approach that combines scientific objectivity with theological values is needed so that Islamic social sciences do not lose their spiritual identity. Thus, this article asserts that positivism can be a methodological inspiration for the development of Islamic social studies, as long as it is placed within the epistemological framework of tawhid, which balances rationality and religious morality.

Keywords: Positivism, Modern Philosophy, Social Sciences, Islamic Epistemology, Integration of Knowledge.



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P-ISSN: 2338:6673; E-ISSN 2442:8280

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INTRODUCTION

The long journey of human philosophy shows dynamics that continue to evolve from time to time. From Ancient Greece to modern times, humans have always sought to understand reality, existence, and the most reliable sources of knowledge.¹ One important phase in the evolution of thought was the emergence of positivism in the 19th century, which is considered a new era in the history of modern philosophy. Positivism emerged as a response to the dominance of medieval metaphysics and scholastic theology, which were considered too speculative and not based on empirical evidence. In the view of positivism, true knowledge is only that which comes from facts that can be observed, measured, and verified scientifically.

The main figure of this movement was Auguste Comte (1798–1857), known as the "Father of Sociology." Through his monumental work *Cours de Philosophie Positive*, Comte asserted that science must be free from metaphysical and religious values in order to achieve true objectivity. According to him, human thought develops in three stages of intellectual evolution, namely the theological, metaphysical, and positive stages. In the positive stage, humans begin to use scientific methods to understand the social world as they understand the natural world.² Thus, Comte sought to make social science equal to natural science through the application of observation, classification, and generalization methods to social phenomena.

The paradigm of positivism then became the foundation for the birth of various modern scientific disciplines, especially sociology and other empirical social sciences. Its influence was so strong that it gave rise to a new spirit in the search for scientific truth based on objective evidence, rather than on the authority of tradition or sacred texts. However, this approach also drew sharp criticism because it was considered to negate the moral and transcendental dimensions of human life. In the context of Islamic scholarship, positivism presents a serious epistemological challenge: how to combine scientific rationality with the divine values that are at the core of Islamic teachings.³

In the intellectual history of Islam, the pursuit of knowledge has never been separated from ethical and spiritual aspects. Knowledge (*'ilm*) in Islam is not merely

¹ G. E. R. Lloyd (book author) and Paul T. Keyser (review author), "Being, Humanity, and Understanding: Studies in Ancient and Modern Societies," *Aestimatio: Critical Reviews in the History of Science* 11 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.33137/aestimatio.v11i0.26051>.

² Auguste Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, Trans. Harriet Martineau (London: George Bell and Sons, 1896).

³ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1978).



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P-ISSN: 2338:6673; E-ISSN 2442:8280

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a tool for understanding the empirical world, but also a means of drawing closer to Allah. Therefore, when the Western positivist paradigm was introduced to the Islamic world through colonialism and modernization, Muslim thinkers faced an epistemological dilemma between accepting modern scientific methods or maintaining the principle of tawhid as the basis of knowledge. Some thinkers, such as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, then proposed the concept of Islamization of knowledge, which seeks to integrate scientific methods with Islamic values without losing its spiritual foundation.

In addition, the influence of positivism is also evident in contemporary Islamic social studies. Empirical methodologies have begun to be adopted by Muslim scholars in social, economic, and Islamic education research, with the aim of strengthening the scientific validity and objectivity of the study results.⁴ However, in this process, tensions often arise between scientific approaches that tend to be neutral toward Islamic values and teachings that are laden with normative dimensions. This is where the importance lies in building an integrative approach that combines empirical rationality and revelatory spirituality, so that Islamic social science does not lose its moral identity while remaining relevant in facing the challenges of the modern era.

Several previous studies have examined this issue from different perspectives. For instance, Al-Attas and al-Faruqi focused on the Islamization of knowledge movement as an epistemological response to Western positivism, while Amin Abdullah emphasized the integrative-interconnected paradigm that bridges religious and empirical sciences. Meanwhile, more recent studies, such as Turner and Ahimsa-Putra, explored how positivist methods can enhance objectivity in sociological research, yet they did not directly address how these methods can be harmonized with the tawhidic foundation of Islamic epistemology.

This research differs from those previous works by specifically analyzing positivism as a philosophical and methodological paradigm and its direct influence on the epistemological construction of Islamic social studies. Rather than merely describing the tension between secular and religious sciences, this study aims to critically explore how positivist principles can be integrated within the framework of tawhid-based Islamic epistemology. Therefore, the main focus of this study is to examine the dialectical relationship between positivism and Islamic epistemology and to formulate an integrative model that harmonizes empirical rationality with

⁴ Muhammad Asim Imam et al., "Contextualizing Research Approaches: The Role of Western and Islamic Philosophies in Shaping Methodology and Knowledge Creation," *Al-Irfan* 8, no. 16 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.58932/mulb0029>.



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P-ISSN: 2338:6673; E-ISSN 2442:8280

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spiritual revelation. Through this approach, Islamic social studies are expected to develop as a discipline that is empirically rigorous, rationally coherent, and spiritually grounded.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Approach

This research uses a qualitative approach with a *library research* method. This approach was chosen because the research is conceptual and philosophical in nature, oriented towards an in-depth examination of ideas, theories, and texts relevant to the theme of positivism and its influence on Islamic social studies. The qualitative approach allows researchers to understand the meaning behind concepts, rather than simply measuring phenomena quantitatively.⁵

In the context of philosophical and religious social research, the library research method is the main foundation because the data sources used are textual and conceptual, not empirical-field. Through literature analysis, researchers can trace the thoughts of important figures such as Auguste Comte, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber in the positivist tradition, and compare them with the thoughts of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, Fazlur Rahman, and Ismail Raji al-Faruqi in the Islamic scientific tradition. This approach also opens up a space for reflection on the extent to which positivism has influenced the epistemological construction of modern Islamic social sciences.⁶

Data Sources

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data.

a. Primary Data

Primary data comes from the major works of philosophers and social thinkers directly related to the concept of positivism and its influence on social science. The main sources in this study, include the works of Auguste Comte, such as *Cours de Philosophie Positive and A General View of Positivism*, as well as Émile Durkheim's *The Rules of Sociological Method*, which explains the application of scientific methods in understanding social phenomena. In addition, this study also uses the works of modern Islamic thinkers such as Fazlur Rahman (*Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*) and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (*Islam and Secularism*), which discuss the relationship between scientific rationality and Islamic spirituality.⁷

⁵ John Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th Ed (California: SAGE Publications, 2018).

⁶ Bryan S. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 1991).

⁷ Auguste Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, Trans. J.H. Bridges (London: Routledge, 2009).



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b. Secondary Data

Secondary data includes supporting literature that reinforces the analysis of primary data. These sources include academic books, scientific journal articles, seminar proceedings, and previous research results relevant to the topics of positivism and Islamic epistemology. Examples include Alan Swingewood's *A Short History of Sociological Thought*, Bryan S. Turner's *Religion and Social Theory*, and Muhammad Arkoun's *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*. These sources serve as a conceptual framework that helps clarify the position of positivism in the context of modernity and how these ideas are responded to by Islamic thinkers.⁸

1. Data Collection Techniques

The data collection technique in this study was conducted through *library* research, namely by searching through various scientific works, both printed and digital. The researcher identified and reviewed the main sources discussing positivism, philosophy of science, and Islamic social theory. Data collection was carried out in systematic steps, including:

1. Searching for classical and modern literature related to the research theme;
2. Taking notes and grouping them based on topic relevance;
3. Conducting a critical review of the literature to identify core ideas, similarities, and differences between figures.

In addition, data was also collected from nationally and internationally indexed academic journals, such as *the Islamic Studies Journal*, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, and *Studia Islamika*. This technique enabled researchers to obtain a comprehensive picture of how positivism is understood and adapted in Islamic social studies.^{9,10}

2. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis in this study was conducted using descriptive-analytical and reflective-comparative methods. This method aims to describe and analyze the thoughts of the figures systematically, then compare them to find conceptual similarities and differences between positivism and Islamic epistemology. The analysis process was carried out through the following stages:

a. Data Classification

At this stage, all data collected was classified according to the main themes of the research, such as positivism theory, scientific methods in sociology, and

⁸ Muhammad Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (London: Saqi Books, 2002).

⁹ Burhan Bungin, *Analisis Data Penelitian Kualitatif* (Jakarta: Raja Grafindo Persada, 2003).

¹⁰ Sugiyono, "Metode Penelitian Kuantitati Kualitatif Dan R&D," 2020.



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Islamic thinkers' responses to positivism. This grouping was important so that the analysis could be carried out in a focused manner and not stray from the context of the research.

b. Text Interpretation

This stage involves an in-depth reading of the main works of the figures, paying attention to the historical and ideological context in which the texts were written. A hermeneutic approach is used to interpret the meaning behind the text, so that there is no misunderstanding between the author's intention and the socio-cultural context of the time.¹¹

c. Critical Analysis

Critical analysis is conducted to assess the relevance and limitations of positivism when confronted with the Islamic knowledge system. At this stage, an evaluation is carried out on the epistemological and methodological aspects of positivism and its implications for modern Islamic social sciences. This approach also seeks to reveal the potential bias of secularism contained in positivism, while seeking possibilities for integration with Islamic values.

d. Synthesis of Findings

This stage is the result of the entire analysis process. The researcher concludes that positivism has made an important contribution to strengthening scientific methods in social sciences, but it needs to be contextualized within the epistemological framework of tawhid so as not to fall into materialistic reductionism. This synthesis forms the basis for the emergence of the idea of integrating empirical rationality and Islamic spirituality.¹²

3. Data Validity

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, this study uses source triangulation and critical literature analysis techniques. Triangulation is carried out by comparing various sources from different disciplines philosophy, sociology, and Islamic studies to ensure that the conclusions drawn are not partial. This approach also helps to avoid interpretive bias that often arises in philosophical studies.

In addition, the researcher cross-verified classical and contemporary works to assess the consistency of the arguments. For example, Comte's concept of *the law of three stages* was compared with Durkheim's view of social facts, then linked to the theory of *maqāṣid al-syarī'ah* in Islam as a form of epistemological synthesis. Validity is reinforced through critical readings of modern literature such as John

¹¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004).

¹² Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).



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W. Creswell's *Research Design*, which emphasizes the importance of credibility in qualitative research, and Lexy J. Moleong's *Qualitative Research Methodology*, which underlines the importance of intellectual honesty and researcher reflectivity.¹³ Thus, this research method ensures that the results of the analysis are not only theoretical but also have a strong academic basis, are objective, and are scientifically accountable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Positivism as a Modern Philosophical Paradigm

Positivism emerged as one of the major currents in modern philosophy that marked a paradigm shift in the way humans understand knowledge. This idea was born out of the spirit of *the Enlightenment* in Europe, which emphasized rationality, empiricism, and scientific progress as the basis of human civilization. Auguste Comte, as the main pioneer of positivism, argued that the development of human thought follows the law of intellectual evolution called *the "law of three stages,"* namely the theological, metaphysical, and positive stages.¹⁴ In the final stage, humans no longer explain reality through the intervention of supernatural forces or metaphysical abstractions, but through scientific laws that can be tested empirically.

Comte believed that science must be free from metaphysical speculation and religious dogma in order to achieve objectivity. In *Cours de Philosophie Positive*, he asserted that the highest goal of positive philosophy is to unite all branches of science into a single rational system based on observation and experience.¹⁵ In this way, Comte placed sociology as *"the queen of sciences,"* because sociology serves to explain social laws just as physics explains the laws of nature. This paradigm marked a major transformation in the history of science, in which the study of society began to be treated with the same rigorous scientific methods as the natural sciences.

However, this approach was not without criticism. Positivism was often considered to reduce the complexity of humans and society to only measurable empirical aspects, thereby neglecting moral, ethical, and spiritual dimensions.¹⁶ This criticism comes mainly from humanist thinkers and theologians who argue that positivism tends to dismiss the role of values and meaning in social life. Nevertheless, positivism has left an important legacy in the form of methodological

¹³ Lexy Moleong, *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif* (Bandung: PT Remaja Rosdakarya, 2019).

¹⁴ Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, Trans. Harriet Martineau.

¹⁵ Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, Trans. J.H. Bridges.

¹⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).



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discipline in social research, namely an emphasis on data, verification, and objectivity.

2. The Influence of Positivism on Social Science

The influence of positivism is most evident in the birth of modern empirical social science, particularly through the work of Émile Durkheim, Comte's ideological disciple. Durkheim attempted to apply positivistic principles to the study of society through the concept of "*social facts*" patterns of behavior, norms, and institutions that are objective and influence individuals.¹⁷ For Durkheim, the main task of sociology was to observe social facts in the same way that natural scientists observe physical phenomena: empirically, systematically, and value-free.

This thinking became the methodological basis for modern social research, including in the fields of economics, politics, and education. Through positivism, the social sciences gained legitimacy as *a scientific* discipline with rational procedures and validity.¹⁸ However, this approach then gave rise to a new problem: the loss of the dimension of values and morality in social studies. In the positivist view, religion and ethics are often considered subjective variables that cannot be measured scientifically, and are therefore tended to be excluded from social analysis.

This condition poses a major challenge for Islamic thinkers, because in the Islamic intellectual tradition, knowledge is always understood in an integrative manner between the empirical and spiritual dimensions. Islam does not recognize a dichotomy between worldly knowledge and religious knowledge, because both originate from one epistemological principle, namely *tawhid*.¹⁹ Therefore, the influence of positivism on Islamic social science needs to be critically addressed so as not to cause fragmentation between scientific rationality and divine values.

3. The Response of Islamic Thinkers to Positivism

The entry of positivism into the Islamic world occurred through the process of modernization and Western intellectual colonialism in the 19th and 20th centuries. Many Islamic educational institutions in the Muslim world subsequently adopted Western scientific curricula, including positivistic methods in social and economic research. This had an ambivalent impact: on the one hand, it increased the rationality and systematic thinking of Muslims, but on the other hand, it led to

¹⁷ Émile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (New York: The Free Press, 1982).

¹⁸ Alan Swingewood, *A Short History of Sociological Thought* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

¹⁹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995).



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the secularization of science, which had the potential to erode spiritual and moral unity.²⁰

Modern Muslim thinkers such as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas argue that the dominance of positivism has given rise to an epistemological crisis in the Islamic world. He argues that positivism is based on a secular worldview that separates science from values and religion. In his book *Islam and Secularism*, al-Attas emphasizes the need for the "Islamization of science," which is an effort to return science to the framework of tawhid by rejecting secularization born of modern Western philosophy.

Similarly, Ismail Raji al-Faruqi proposes the concept of the integration of knowledge (*'ilm*), in which modern scientific methods can be used as long as they do not violate Islamic moral and spiritual principles.²¹ Meanwhile, Fazlur Rahman offers a "double movement" approach, which is a dual movement between the historical and modern contexts in understanding religious texts, so that Islamic teachings remain rational and relevant without losing their transcendental roots.²² These three figures emphasize that although positivism has made a significant contribution to scientific methodology, it cannot be used as the sole epistemological basis for constructing Islamic social science, because it ignores the role of revelation as the highest source of knowledge.

4. Integration between Positivism and Islamic Epistemology

In the contemporary context, Muslim scholars have begun to develop an integrative approach that attempts to combine the methodological advantages of positivism with the spiritual values of Islam. This effort is known as the "interconnected science integration" paradigm, as proposed by Amin Abdullah, who rejects the dichotomy between religious and general science.²³ This paradigm emphasizes the importance of using scientific methods as a means to strengthen faith, not replace it.

This integration is carried out through three main steps: first, epistemological criticism of positivism so as not to deny values and meanings in social reality; second, methodological adoption of scientific methods such as observation, verification, and objectivity to strengthen the validity of Islamic social

²⁰ S. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory*.

²¹ Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Work Plan* (Washington D.C: IIIT, 1982).

²² Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*.

²³ Amin Abdullah, *Islamic Studies Di Perguruan Tinggi: Pendekatan Integratif-Interkonektif* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2006).



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studies; and third, spiritual ethical reconstruction so that social science does not lose its moral orientation.²⁴

Thus, Islamic social science can develop as an empirical and normative discipline, which not only explains social reality but also provides moral and spiritual direction for social change. This approach places revelation and reason not as mutually exclusive entities but as complementary in building a just and civilized civilization.

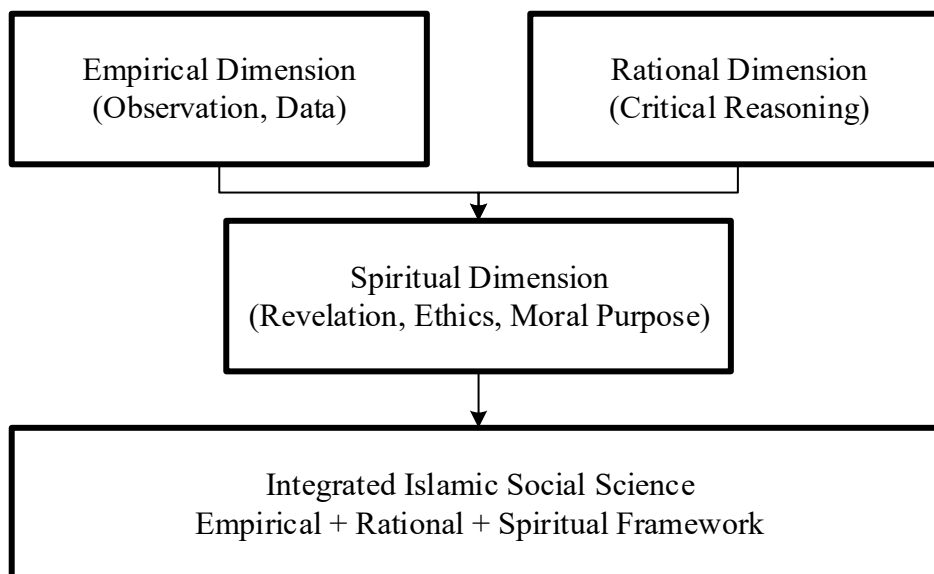


Figure 1. Model of Integration between Positivism and Islamic Epistemology

5. Implications of Positivism for Islamic Social Studies

The application of positivistic principles in Islamic social studies has several important implications. First, from a methodological perspective, positivism helps strengthen the objectivity of Islamic social research by emphasizing the importance of empirical data, evidence, and systematic analysis. Second, from an epistemological perspective, it encourages critical awareness among Muslim academics to test the validity of knowledge based on reality, not merely tradition. However, third, from an ontological perspective, positivism also poses the risk of spiritual reductionism, namely the tendency to ignore the transcendent aspects of social phenomena that form the core of the Islamic worldview.²⁵

Therefore, the influence of positivism on Islamic social studies must be placed in proportion: it can be accepted as a scientific method, but not as a

²⁴ Heddy Shri Ahimsa-Putra, *Paradigma, Epistemologi, Dan Metodologi Penelitian Sosial Budaya* (Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 2012).

²⁵ Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th Ed.



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worldview. Only in this way can Islamic social science utilize the empirical power of positivism without losing its theological and moral orientation.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study and discussion, it can be concluded that positivism is an important milestone in the history of the development of modern philosophy, marking a shift in the orientation of knowledge from metaphysical speculation to an empirical and scientific approach. By emphasizing observation, verification, and rationality, positivism has succeeded in bringing about major changes in the way humans understand social reality. Auguste Comte, as the main proponent of this school of thought, wanted all branches of science to be based on positive laws that can be tested through sensory experience. This paradigm then gave birth to the tradition of scientific sociology and made a significant contribution to social research methodology in the modern world.

In the context of Islamic social studies, the influence of positivism is ambivalent. On the one hand, positivism enriches Islamic scientific methodology by emphasizing the importance of objectivity, systematics, and empirical verification in understanding social reality. Through these scientific principles, Islamic social studies can be more accurate and rational in explaining religious and social phenomena. However, on the other hand, the absolute application of positivism has the potential to ignore the spiritual and normative dimensions that are at the core of Islamic epistemology. This is because positivism departs from a secular paradigm that places knowledge as the result of human experience alone, without considering revelation as a source of metaphysical truth.

Therefore, an integrative and contextual approach is needed in adopting positivism into Islamic social studies. Modern Muslim thinkers such as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, and Fazlur Rahman emphasize the importance of returning the orientation of science to the principle of tawhid, namely the unity between revelation, reason, and empirical experience. This integration does not mean rejecting modern science, but rather placing it within the moral and spiritual framework of Islam so that science is not detached from human values and justice. Thus, positivism can be used as a methodological inspiration, rather than the main epistemological foundation, for the development of Islamic social science that is both rational and religious.

Conceptually, the synthesis between positivism and Islamic epistemology gives birth to a new paradigm in empirical-normative social studies, namely science that is based on factual data but still guided by transcendental values. This approach opens up great opportunities for the Islamic academic world to develop social



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sciences that not only explain what exists (*das Sein*), but also what should exist (*das Sollen*). Thus, Islam can emerge as an intellectual force capable of bridging modern scientific rationality and revelatory spirituality in shaping a civilization that is just, ethical, and oriented towards universal humanity.

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